

What Jesus' resurrection says about politics

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Theology, and particularly Christology, has often been completely apolitical.¹ Those who do explore the political relevance of Jesus have often sought to reclaim his life and teachings, or look to the cross as the culmination of his mission and his supreme confrontation with political power. Yet Christ's resurrection is the central and essential belief of Christianity, and without it Christ's teachings and crucifixion would not be remembered "two weeks, let alone two millennia, after his death" (cf. 1 Cor. 15:12-14).² Treatments of the resurrection have usually focussed solely on historical and ontological questions of whether the resurrection happened, and the specificities of his resurrection form.³ Discussions of what the resurrection means politically are rare and often brief, but they can be found. In this essay I briefly delineate twelve such themes found in the work of New Testament scholars, systematic theologians, Christian ethicists, historians, atonement theorists and liberation theologians.⁴

I take as starting premises three contentions that are by no means uncontroversial, but fall outside the scope of this essay; N.T. Wright argues them at length in his *Christian Origins and the Question of God* series.⁵ Firstly, the resurrection actually happened; it was not a fabrication by his early followers, nor a product of their disappointed imaginations after his death. Secondly, the resurrection was a bodily, material, this-worldly phenomenon, consistent with the Jewish worldview rather than a Gnostic longing for a separate 'spiritual' realm.⁶ Thirdly, 'religion' and 'politics' were one in Jesus' time, in contrast to our contemporary bifurcation between them.⁷ With this third we are clearly already touching on political significance, but the second, too, is politically relevant when we examine Jewish belief in resurrection at the time of Jesus.

Resurrection was always political

Resurrection belief was a relatively late development in Judaism, hinted at in Psalms 49:15 and 73:24, Isaiah 26:19, and Daniel 12:1-2 and becoming widespread in the Maccabean period.⁸ Resurrection hope was based in, and arguably a logical extension of, faith in a sovereign and just God amid an unjust world and an oppressed Israel.⁹ To be truly just, it was supposed that God must vindicate his servants in the past as well as the present and future, and the archetype of resurrection hope is found in martyrs who died in hope of vindication by God (2 Maccabees 7, especially 7:9).¹⁰

Thus, resurrection did not arise out of individual hopes for immortality, but political-religious hopes for divine justice and the liberation of Israel from oppressive empires; it was an inherently "revolutionary doctrine" and remained so in Jesus' time.¹¹ Resurrection was also tied up with hopes of new exodus, return from exile and the kingdom of God; all of which carried "inescapable political meaning."¹² As well as literal reference to resurrecting human bodies, resurrection symbolised restoration of Israel and a new age of justice and freedom.¹³

By the late second-temple period, most Palestinian Jews believed in resurrection, with the notable exception of the theologically conservative, aristocratic Sadducees who had less stake than most in

1 Pieris, "Asia," 260.

2 Wright, *Victory*, 659.

3 Moltmann, "Hope," 129–130.

4 And some who fit in more than one of these categories.

5 Wright, *Victory*, 199; Wright, *Resurrection*.

6 Wright, *Victory*, 659; Moltmann, "Hope," 142; Moltmann, "Future," 587.

7 Wright, *Victory*, 296; Bauckham, *Politics*, vii; Storkey, *Politics*, 9.

8 Bauckham, "Afterlife," 83.

9 Bauckham, "God," passim; Moltmann, "Hope," 131.

10 Wright, *Victory*, 131; Bauckham, "God," 143.

11 Bauckham, "Afterlife," 86,88; Wright, *Resurrection*, 139,233,422,428,582–583.

12 Wright, *Resurrection*, 337,427,428.

13 Ibid., 127–131,204,255–256,428.

“overturning the present order and ushering in the kingdom” (cf. Mark 12:18-27; Acts 23:6).¹⁴

The resurrection of Jesus radicalises resurrection belief by bringing it into the present

The early Christians believed that in Jesus’ resurrection, these hopes were being fulfilled. Because resurrection was the fullest extent of Israel’s prophetic hopes, declaring that the resurrection had begun “included and represented all the Old Testament promises for the future;” the inauguration of God’s eschatological reign and the in-breaking of new creation (2 Cor 5:17 cf. Isa 65:17-25).¹⁵ This further radicalised resurrection belief by bringing it from the future to the present; Christ’s resurrection was the “first fruits” of the general resurrection, the return from exile and the reign of God (1 Cor 15:20).¹⁶ This is nothing less than the beginning of a new age; in a “world of violence and corruption,” the “flag of redemption” is planted at the resurrection, the “political fulcrum of all history.”¹⁷

Like the Kingdom, the resurrection is “now but not yet,” but since the resurrection has brought the Kingdom into our history, the church can now – must now – live it out.¹⁸ This can be seen broadly as enacting a politics of life over death, affirming in general all struggles for peace, freedom and justice; as seen in the work of some liberation theologians.¹⁹

Jesus’ resurrection is the culmination of his story from pre-existence to *parousia*

However, this kind of general ‘resurrection politics’ usually ends up looking very much like the politics of the people discussing it. It also runs the risk of abstracting the concept of resurrection from the specific narrative of Jesus; pre-existence, incarnation, teachings, praxis, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, exaltation, return.²⁰

Jesus’ resurrection is the culmination of his work, and Jesus’ narrative, and indeed the entire biblical narrative, must be read through it.²¹ Thus the cross and resurrection must be seen as a single unit, “interpreted in light of” one another to avoid either shallow triumphalism or what Nietzsche called “slave morality.”²² Meanwhile, the resurrection and ascension must be read together to ensure both divine glory and this-worldly significance are maintained.²³ Attention to the specific biblical narrative culminating in resurrection reveals much more concrete and specific political relevance than simply resurrection as a simple for hope or change.

The resurrection is the decisive moment in the victory of God

The resurrection declares the victory of God and his (re-)creation project over forces that stand against it.²⁴ Some biblical texts speak of the cross as bringing this victory (eg. Col 2:13-15), but without the resurrection Jesus would have been just another failed messiah.²⁵ The resurrection turns the most humiliating defeat into the highest victory; declaring that the victory of God’s “gentle power” had already happened, even if it was (and is) yet to be fully enacted.²⁶ The resurrection

14 Bauckham, “Afterlife,” 80–87,93; Wright, *Resurrection*, 204,428,582–583,737.

15 Bauckham, *Politics*, 149–150.

16 Rowland, “Interpreting,” 71,75–76; Wright, *Victory*, 110,127,128,130; Wright, *Resurrection*, 727.

17 Bockmuehl, “Resurrection,” 117; Storkey, *Politics*, 280; Moltmann, “Realism,” 151; Wright, *Resurrection*, 336,371; Schmiechen, *Saving*, 136; Hays, *Moral*, 19–20,45–46; Hauerwas and Willimon, *Aliens*, 24.

18 Yoder, *Politics*, 176,187; Wright, “Whither,” 149; Wright, *Resurrection*, 235; Marshall, “Atonement,” 92.

19 Janssen, “Bodily,” 62–77; Schmiechen, *Saving*, 142,150,161; Pieris, “Asia,” 260; Paeth, “Moltmann’s,” 218; Moltmann, “Hope,” 144,146; Moltmann, “Realism,” 151,155; Moltmann, “Future,” 582–583.

20 Reno, “Hauerwas,” 307; Pieris, “Asia,” 260; Schwager, “Christology,” 349–353; Hauerwas, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 142.

21 Wright, “Whither,” 148; Hays, “Resurrection”; Bockmuehl, “Resurrection,” 104,116.

22 Schmiechen, *Saving*, 136; Yoder, *Politics*, 146; Moltmann, “Hope,” 138; Moltmann, “Realism,” 152; Paeth, “Moltmann’s,” 217; Kwok Pui-lan, “Southern,” 199; Gorringer, “Christology,” 365.

23 Rowland, “Interpreting,” 77,79,82; Wright, *Resurrection*, 655–656,665.

24 Elliott, “Anti-Imperial,” 181; Wright, *Resurrection*, 334.

25 Wright, *Victory*, 110,659; Bockmuehl, “Resurrection,” 102–104.

26 Storkey, *Politics*, 278,281; Wright, *Victory*, 659.

revealed YHWH as the true God of the universe, brought “Israel’s history to its climax” and declared God would do for the world what he had done at the Exodus.²⁷

This victory of God’s plans was in contradiction to the political-religious eschatology of the Roman empire, which told the glorious story of Rome’s history from Venus through Aeneas and Romulus through to Octavian, or whoever the current emperor was.²⁸ The early Christians did not capitulate to this Roman narrative as Josephus did; their resurrection faith confirmed that God’s plan is “the reality of which Caesar’s dream for world domination is the parody.”²⁹

Resurrection and ascension reveals Jesus as messiah and true world sovereign

Jesus’ resurrection and ascension together proclaim Jesus as Israel’s hoped-for messiah or divine political-religious liberator, and, moreover, the true sovereign of “heaven and earth” (Matt 28:18; Rom 1:3-5; Eph 1:20-21, Phil 2:9-11).³⁰ This was not read as a reductively ‘spiritual’ insight into Jesus’ ontological status any more than Caesar’s claims to be “lord,” “saviour” and “son of God” were purely ‘political’. To declare Jesus as messiah and divine Lord was to claim that “Jesus is lord and Caesar is not;” the early church thus rendered “allegiance to Jesus rather than to Caesar.”³¹

Cross and resurrection heralds the defeat of the Powers

The victory of God means the defeat of all powers that stand against her (1 Cor 15:24-26). As suggested by Walter Wink, biblical language of “powers,” “principalities,” “authorities,” “dominions,” “elemental spirits” etc. cannot be reduced to either ‘purely spiritual’ entities or personifications of socio-political reality, but represent all fallen forces in rebellion against God and oppressing creation; social structures, Satan as the ‘lord of this world’ (2 Cor 4:4, John 14:30, Rev 12:9) and supra-personal forces of sin, evil, the law and death.³² The New Testament, as well as Irenaeus and Athanasius, portrays God’s victory in the cross and resurrection as the defeat of all these enemies; the Powers are variously portrayed as disarmed and triumphed over (Col 2:15), made subject to Jesus (2 Pet 3:21b-22), or destroyed (1 Cor 15:24-26,54-57).³³ This means also the liberation of the world from these “oppressive and dehumanizing powers,” as prefigured in Jesus’ exorcisms.³⁴

Resurrection means the defeat of death

Most importantly, resurrection signals the defeat of the “last enemy,” death (1 Cor 15:26,54-57).³⁵ Even death cannot be depoliticised, as the ability to inflict violent death is both the “primary social manifestation of sin” (cf. Gen 4:1-16,23-25,6:11) and the basis for the rule of “earthly rulers.”³⁶

Wink observes a “myth of redemptive violence” present everywhere from the Babylonian creation myth to contemporary children’s television, suggesting peace stems from a violent force subduing all other violent forces.³⁷ Wink calls this myth the dominant religion of contemporary society; it is certainly consistent with Thomas Hobbes’ creation story of the modern nation-state and Max Weber’s definition of a state as a community that “claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of

27 Wright, *Victory*, 609; Wright, *Resurrection*, 232–233,333–338,429.

28 Crossan, *Empire*, 15–25; Wright, *Paul*, 64; Horsley, *Empire*, 146.

29 Wright, *Paul*, 68; Wright, *Resurrection*, 232–233.

30 Wright, *Resurrection*, 233,242–245,472,569; Wright, “Whither,” 148.

31 Wright, *Resurrection*, 233,428,719–731; Horsley (ed.), *Empire*.

32 Wink, *Naming*; Wink, *Unmasking*; Wink, *Engaging*; Gorringer, “Christology,” 366; Boyd, “Victor,” 28–29,38; Green, “Response,” 62–63; Schmiechen, *Saving*, 124; Wright, *Resurrection*, 336.

33 Wright, *Victory*, 659; Wright, *Resurrection*, 336,659; Yoder, *Politics*, 146; Boyd, “Victor,” 32; Schmiechen, *Saving*, 126–127,130; Klager, “Irenaeus,” passim.

34 Schmiechen, *Saving*, 123–124.

35 Moltmann, “Realism,” 152; Schmiechen, *Saving*, 130; Klager, “Irenaeus,” 468; Stoltzfus, “Penal,” 316.

36 Marshall, “Atonement,” 70,81–82,90; Wink, *Engaging*, 141; Wright, *Resurrection*, 730–731; Elliott, “Anti-Imperial,” 181.

37 Wink, *Engaging*, 13–31; Gorringer, “Christology,” 366.

physical force within a given territory.”³⁸

Resurrection was the only way God could win what Irenaeus calls a non-violent victory over the powers of death, and the eventual defeat of all death necessitates the destruction of the “ultimate weapon” of all who rule through death.³⁹

Resurrection vindicates Jesus’ political programme

This suggests God has a very different vision for how to reign on earth (cf. Matt 6:10). This alternative vision is articulated in the teaching and praxis of Jesus. The resurrection means God has vindicated Jesus’ enactment of his mission and placed the divine stamp of approval on the specific form of salvation he preached.⁴⁰ Jesus’ most common phrase, “kingdom of God,” was unmistakably political in the context.⁴¹ The Kingdom is not “some cipher that we can fill in with our ideas about what a good society ought to look like,” but a specific and very political vision.⁴²

This finds its fullest articulation in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7), a “challenge to Israel to *be* Israel” even in a “time of great stress and ambiguity;” Jesus redefined this as a politics of mercy, forgiveness, justice, integrity, trust in God, enemy-love and non-violent resistance.⁴³ Jesus fiercely challenged economic injustice and social exclusion, displaying a “preferential option” for the poor, young and oppressed and implying the powerful could only find their salvation alongside them.⁴⁴

Jesus’ Nazareth Manifesto (Luke 4:14-20) suggests his mission fulfilled the Isaianic vision of good news to the poor, sight to the blind, and freedom for prisoners and the oppressed, as well as enacting Deuteronomy’s vision of Jubilee; debt-cancellation and wealth-equalisation.⁴⁵ Here, as in the Lord’s Prayer (Matt 6:12,14-15), it is likely Jesus was suggesting forgiving both personal ‘debts’ and literal economic debts.⁴⁶

It appears the early church saw it as their post-resurrection mission to live out Jesus’ political programme; Acts 4:32-35 directly links the Jerusalem church’s communal ownership of economic resources to their “testimony to the resurrection.”⁴⁷

Resurrection vindicates the non-violent politics of the cross

However, Jesus did not enact his Kingdom politics in the expected way. While most Jews awaited a military messiah to violently overthrow the Romans and restore the Jewish nation-state, Jesus seemed to see this as compromising with the empires by attempting to defeat them with their own weapons.⁴⁸ Preaching the kingdom of God, but rejecting popular resistance movements, made him “doubly subversive,” and sure enough, the nationalistic Pharisees and collaborating Herodians united against him (Mark 2:6).⁴⁹

Jesus’ alternative victory strategy was the way of the cross. Before it was a Christian symbol, the cross was symbolised the political power of Rome. Reserved for slaves and revolutionaries, such as the 6,000 crucified for participating in Spartacus’ slave revolt, crucifixion was the ultimate deterrent

38 Hobbes, *Leviathan*; Weber, “Politics,” 77.

39 Klager, “Irenaeus,” 439–440, 460–479; Schmiechen, *Saving*, 126–127; Wright, *Resurrection*, 730–731, 737; Wright, *Paul*, 69–70; Elliott, “Anti-Imperial,” 181; Marshall, “Atonement,” 80–81, 91.

40 Hauerwas, *Peaceable*, 79; Wright, *Victory*, 164–166, 659–660. The fact that God has decided in favour of Jesus also means she has decided *against* Jesus’ opponents, some of whom also claimed God’s authority. Schwager, “Christology,” 351–352.

41 Thompson, “Jesus,” 46–51; Wright, *Victory*, 296–297.

42 Hauerwas, *Peaceable*, 82–83; Wright, *Victory*, 258, 274–297; Goringe, “Eschatology,” 106; Yoder, *Politics*, 52.

43 Wright, *Victory*, 287–292.

44 Bauckham, *Politics*, 145–147.

45 Yoder, *Politics*, 28–29, 60–75; Wright, *Victory*, 294–295.

46 Yoder, *Politics*, 28–29, 60–75; Wright, *Victory*, 294–295.

47 Wright, *Victory*, 295; Hays, *Moral*, 125, 135, 451–452, 464–468.

48 Wright, *Victory*, 290–291, 595; Hays, *Moral*, 164, 167; Schwager, “Christology,” 351.

49 Wright, *Victory*, 296; Hauerwas, *Peaceable*, 83–85.

against defying Roman power.⁵⁰ Even though he was not guilty of armed rebellion, Jesus was executed as a political subversive; this was the inevitable result of a rebellious world confronting its true Lord (1 Cor 2:8).⁵¹ Yet Jesus went willingly to the cross (John 10:18), enacting his own call to love and pray for the enemy (Matt 5:38-48).⁵²

This renders all the more shocking the fact that Jesus called all his followers to take up their crosses and follow him (Mark 8:27-38). John Howard Yoder points out that the New Testament language of imitation of Christ is not a general principle of self-sacrifice, but centres around this specific claim to imitate the cross, “the price of social nonconformity.”⁵³ Before the resurrection, however, this was not a price the disciples were willing or able to pay; the politics of the cross was ultimately not possible without hope of resurrection (Mark 8:27-38).

Resurrection enables the church to collectively embody the politics of Jesus

Resurrection is therefore necessary to turn the apparently impossible politics of Jesus into a possibility for the church (1 Cor 15:13-19,30-32,58). It was only the knowledge that “death does not have the final word” that enabled the disciples to follow the way of the cross unto martyrdom, and it is only the eschatological hope of the resurrection that makes the seeming “impossible ideals” of the Sermon on the Mount a liveable reality for the church.⁵⁴ Jesus had instructed his disciples not to fear those who can kill the body (Matt 10:28; Luke 12:4); only in light of resurrection can they truly be freed from fear of death (Heb 2:14-15), and therefore freed to live God’s politics.⁵⁵

This politics enables the church to experience a foretaste of the new creation, envisioned as a peaceable kingdom (Isa 11:6-9; 65:17-25). This kingdom is not lived out by atomised individuals, nor by seeking to reform the world’s political structures, but is lived out in the church (*ekklēsia*, political assembly), a “new community made possible by Jesus’ death and resurrection.”⁵⁶ In these communities, citizens of an alternative empire (Phil 3:20) are called to participate in the “fellowship” of Christ’s suffering, and by so doing, attain the joy of his resurrection (Phil 2:1-11; 3:10-14; Rom 8:17; Mark 8:35).⁵⁷

Cross and resurrection provides a pattern for a politics based on the sovereignty of God

Despite the hope of resurrection, twenty-first century Christians may still balk at enacting Jesus’ radical politics; it is all very well, we may respond, to be generous, forgiving, and non-violent in the church, but in the real world, violence is sometimes a sad necessity for the greater good. Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas point out that underlying this line of thought is the Constantinian assumption that ‘we,’ via the dominant political systems of our time, are the benevolent controllers of history.⁵⁸

Cross and resurrection offers an alternative way to conceive of our acting in history, which cedes sovereignty over history to God, trusting what Barth called “divine history” rather than the world’s “so-called” history.⁵⁹ Giving up this control allows us to see cross and resurrection as God’s “*modus operandi*” of history; as Yoder put it, “the relationship between the obedience of God’s people and the triumph of God’s cause is not a relationship of cause and effect but one of cross and

50 Bauckham, *Politics*, 147–148; Elliott, “Anti-Imperial,” 167–171; Wright, *Paul*, 64; Gorringer, “Christology,” 365; Green, “Kaleidoscopic,” 159.

51 Wright, *Victory*, 544; Hays, *Moral*, 164–165; Yoder, *Politics*, 49; Green, “Kaleidoscopic,” 160; Hauerwas, *Peaceable*, 87.

52 Marshall, “Atonement,” 91; Schwager, “Christology,” 351.

53 Yoder, *Politics*, 95–96, 112–133; Hauerwas, *Peaceable*, 80–81, 87; Hays, *Moral*, 197; Wright, *Victory*, 1996.

54 Hays, *Moral*, 258, 338–339; Yoder, *Politics*, 176; Hauerwas, *Peaceable*, 87, 90.

55 Storkey, *Politics*, 279; Hauerwas, *Peaceable*, 87–91, 95; Wink, *Engaging*, 141; Janssen, “Bodily,” 62.

56 Hauerwas, *Peaceable*, 94–95; Hauerwas, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 143; Hays, *Moral*, 135, 196–197, 258; Klager, “Irenaeus,” 469; Paeth, “Moltmann’s,” 223, 225, 230.

57 Wright, *Resurrection*, 582–583; Hays, *Moral*, 30–31; Boyd, “Victor,” 40, 47, 152; Paeth, “Moltmann’s,” 223, 225, 230; Bauckham, “God,” 152–153.

58 Yoder, *Politics*, 238; Hauerwas, *Peaceable*, 87–89.

59 Gorringer, “Eschatology,” 93–98.

resurrection.”⁶⁰ Following Jesus who “dies out of obedience and entrusts the future to God,” we do not seek to be effective, but give up our “handle on history” and simply seek to be obedient; Jesus’ resurrection shows us that the ultimate triumph of God’s politics is assured, indeed has already begun; but through her means, not ours.⁶¹

Resurrection provides a utopian realist vision for a politics that is still relevant today

Thus, a historically and biblically contextual view of resurrection provides a “utopia[] combined with realism,” allowing us to be both more radically realist about politics, and more radically hopeful.⁶² The bodily, political, historical resurrection of Jesus does not provide a hope located in another world or in the distant future, which can function as an “opiate of the people,” but a hope that affirms the physical, political world and declares that its final redemption has been brought into the present.⁶³ However, it also allows for radical criticism, as we know that the way it is currently set up is not permanent and shall be redeemed; resurrection thus “validates both apocalyptic hope and apocalyptic critique of the status quo.”⁶⁴

In today’s world, global-consumer-market-capitalism has subsumed all competing meta-narratives so completely that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.⁶⁵ Sadly, this seems equally true for many theologies, Christologies and eschatologies. But a properly biblical view of resurrection can provide hope, even amid looming climate change and the ever-present nuclear threat, and criticism, even of the apparent permanence of the capitalist market and military dominance.⁶⁶ If we recover the politics of the resurrection, we may find the resurrection of Jesus to be every bit as radical today as it was in Jesus’ time.⁶⁷

- Caleb Anderson, 24 May 2013

60 Eller, *Anarchy*, chap. 9; Yoder, *Politics*, 232.

61 Yoder, *Politics*, 109,232–233,237–239,246–247; Hays, *Moral*, 197; Wink, *Engaging*, 218.

62 Bauckham, *Politics*, ix.

63 Moltmann, “Realism,” 149,152; Adams, “Moltmann,” 228–229; Bauckham, “God,” 153; Hauerwas, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 143.

64 Rowland, “Interpreting,” 70,72,83; Moltmann, “Realism,” 150–155; Gorringer, “Eschatology,” 104–105; Hays, *Moral*, 166–167.

65 Bauckham, “Coherent,” 45–53; Žižek, “Ideology,” 1.

66 Gorringer, “Eschatology,” 108–110.

67 Wright, *Resurrection*, 422,713; Gorringer, “Eschatology,” 108–110.

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